



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Jailcare: Finding the Safety Net for Women Behind Bars by Carolyn Sufrin

Citation for published version:

Ford, A 2019, 'Jailcare: Finding the Safety Net for Women Behind Bars by Carolyn Sufrin', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, vol. 25, no. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12983>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1111/1467-9655.12983](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12983)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



intellectual, often scholarly work by non-Western observers of the West? What can we learn from them? How can we learn to listen? In a world where refugees are heading for the rich North – both the United States and Europe – the ability to listen and discuss honestly with each other may become crucial for life on earth in general. What dreams and eventual fantasies do ‘they’ have about us? What is our responsibility? What part have we played in the spread of inequality and hopelessness in the South, and why can ‘we’ not be truthful about this? Why do we fall back on the discourse of a purely ideological war between cultures, rather than take our own human rights project seriously? These are fundamental questions, and especially now that populist regimes have begun to speak about others in terms of culture and cultural differences in a rather essentialist way, they are on the table of anthropologists and other social sciences. Laura Nader continues this line of research, superbly. Her book must be read.

RIK PINXTEN *Ghent University*

SUFRIN, CAROLYN. *Jailcare: finding the safety net for women behind bars*. xii, 311 pp., illus., bibliogr. Oakland: Univ. of California Press, 2018. £24.00 (paper)

Carolyn Sufrin straddles two worlds: she is both obstetrician and anthropologist in her relationships with the women cycling in and out of the San Francisco jail. This ambiguity is repeated in the themes of her ethnography, *Jailcare: finding the safety net for women behind bars*. In arguing that jail is the new safety net for marginalized pregnant American women, Sufrin shows how it is therefore a site of care as well as violence. Using the unique access afforded by her dual role, she chronicles the quotidian ambivalence between degradation and security, denial and connection, and kindness and coercion, which characterizes interactions in jail.

Far from being incommensurate, care and violence are intimately entwined, Sufrin claims. She defines care as ‘the way someone comes to matter’ (p. 6). It results from paying attention to the others with whom one’s own existence is always entangled. One of the book’s central claims is that care must be understood as an everyday intersubjective process, not predetermined by disciplinary power relationships or institutional subordination. To argue this, Sufrin uses quotations and life histories from her informants to good effect; in particular, a poem

written by one of the inmates forms a poignant closing meditation.

Ambiguity also appears in the fluid way the monograph’s subjects move between life in jail and life on the streets. While prison is (at least in popular conception) set apart from mainstream society, people enter and exit jail with a regularity directly connected to their marginality. Since life is rough both inside and outside, many inmates feel ambivalence about which is preferable: they desire jail as much as they hate it.

In some ways, jail is a safe place where inmates can paradoxically ‘be a version of themselves that felt normal’ (p. 241). This stems from one of the two cruel ironies in the book. While the 1976 *Estelle v. Gamble* Supreme Court decision ruled that it was unconstitutional ‘cruel and unusual punishment’ to withhold medical care from inmates, no such cruelty is recognized when medical care is out of reach for those who are not incarcerated. Thus prisoners are the only segment of the US population with a constitutional right to healthcare. The second irony pertains to motherhood: because motherhood is intensely moralized and ideals of ‘deservingness’ shadow discourses about rights, marginalized mothers are punished extra harshly for ‘bad behaviour’ and ‘endangering the baby’. However, because motherhood is also romanticized, it can have powerful humanizing effects. Mothers are both revered and feared: they ‘generate cultural anxieties about the social order they have the power to reproduce’ (p. 130) and carry an ambiguous symbolic status’. Jail amplifies that ambiguity. What to make of a fetus – that innocent, idealized citizen – in the womb of someone being punished for committing a crime? Does this mean the fetus is incarcerated? (p. 131). Guards and staff display this ambivalence: they are variously described as ‘angry because they feel bad for the babies’, showing resigned cynicism, or feeling ‘genuine concern for the well-being of woman and fetus’ (pp. 134–5).

Relatedly, motherhood is a cruel optimism. Sufrin describes a common aspiration among pregnant inmates that childbirth will motivate a sustainable life change, an escape route out of drugs, petty crime, and the ability to mother their child. Yet without adequate support and resources outside the institution, most fresh starts fail. Many pregnant inmates straddle a contradiction: they are drug addicts, but care about the babies they carry. Sufrin writes: ‘[V]ersions of motherhood available in jail were deeply contingent and necessarily limited. And yet some women felt energized by these

opportunities, even desired this jail-cultivated motherhood' (p. 231).

Sufrin could have pushed further on two counts. First, care and discipline intertwine in many other kin and institutional relationships, and comfort and constraint are uneasily but inextricably linked in many experiences of home. She mentions this, but does not examine how the irony of wanting to be in jail is an ambivalence that has wider resonance, even as it describes an especially painful reality. Secondly, she frames the issue as a failure, not a critique, of the liberal state. This is related to her decision to not engage race as a thematic lens (p. 14). Sufrin calls jailcare a symptom of broader social and economic failures to care for society's most marginalized people, a stopgap that merely sustains lives instead of improving them. By not unpacking why that failure is occurring, she implies that it is a sort of moral oversight instead of deeply entrenched in racist, colonial, capitalist ways of thinking and being. These points aside, Sufrin's analysis is insightful and convincing. I recommend this book to scholars of care, reproduction, carcerality, and gender in the United States, and found it an excellent addition to my advanced undergraduate courses on these topics.

ANDREA FORD *University of Chicago*

Modernity's transformations

CEPEK, MICHAEL L.; photographs by BEAR GUERRA. *Life in oil: Cofán survival in the petroleum fields of Amazonia*. xvi, 286 pp., maps, illus., bibliogr. Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2018. £20.99 (paper)

Life in oil is a lively, first-person narrative account of the author's long-term ethnographic research with the Cofán people living in Ecuador. From the time he was an undergraduate student, Michael Cepek has spent many years and numerous summers living in several different Cofán communities. His first book, *A future for Amazonia* (2012), examines an intentional community carved out of the rainforest that is equal parts conservation area and safe haven for the Cofán. His new book recounts his experiences living in the contaminated village of Dureno, which has been polluted for decades by the petroleum extraction carried out by Texaco, Chevron, Petroecuador, and other oil companies.

This book *stinks*, but in a productive way. From the moment Cepek grabs your attention by telling the story of leaning forward to wash his face in a river covered by oil, you begin to smell it.

Cofán people say this themselves: they describe fish caught from polluted waters as *tssu'jutssi* (stinky), and *keroseneme'tssi* (like kerosene). The Cofán have an elaborate vocabulary to describe the properties of *petróleo* or *crudo*, such as:

Ámundetssi (dirty), *sintssi* (black or dark), *tu'atssi* (sticky), *sampe'chatssi* (thick), *chápetssi* (soft), *yaya'pa'caon* (like fat), *ccoqqui'can* (like the dark beeswax used to make blowguns), *tena'tssi* (like water covered with thin pools of grease or fat) . . . and *qquitssatssatssi* (like syrupy liquid that slowly drips down one's throat) (p. 132).

They know this because oil is seemingly everywhere and on everything: it contaminates their drinking water after disconcertingly frequent leaks and spills of various magnitudes; you accidentally fall into pools of it at night when you are hunting; you see, kill, and eat animals coated in it; and the smell gets in your nose and never gets out: *tssu'jutssi*.

However, Cepek wants us to know about more than the problems caused by petroleum contamination, and to see beyond one-dimensional accounts of the Cofán as endangered victims. He does this by presenting experience-near descriptions of individuals with whom he has had long-standing relationships: an older woman whose house he stays in, his godson, a community leader, a famously feisty shaman, and so forth. As a recent interloper in the ethnography of lowland Amazonia, I am often struck by the wide gulf between structuralist accounts and recent work in ontology, on the one hand, in which actual people and their personalities fade into the background, if they are present at all, and the rich tradition of person-centred accounts of Amazonian peoples like this one, on the other.

Most vivid of all are the descriptions of shamans in action: inviting you to drink hallucinogenic *yaje* (ayahuasca); doing battle with shamans in other communities; and revealing the double-sided nature of their practice, that the power to heal is also the power to harm. Cepek additionally provides exemplary insight into how shamanic activities influence people's sense of agency.

Moreover, this is a personal account for Cepek. He writes about himself not only to draw readers in, but also to provide empathetic accounts of Cofán experiences: from what it is like to confront a fresh oil spill in the morning, to what it is like to experience threats of violence from outsiders, and even how his own near-death